

Observing the 1980s: lead by the University of Sussex in partnership with the British Library Sound Archive

Article (Published Version)

Kirby, F J Observing the 1980s: lead by the University of Sussex in partnership with the British Library Sound Archive. JISC Content Programme 2011-2013.

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Observing the 1980s

Lead by the University of Sussex in partnership with the British Library Sound Archive



The Observing the 1980s project has successfully brought together voices from the Mass Observation Project and British Library Sound Archive oral history collections as well as ephemera from the University of Sussex Library to create a valuable open educational resource. For the first time correspondence from the Mass Observation Project has been digitised and made available openly online and British Library audio files made available under a Creative Commons licence. In addition a teaching module which draws on these resources and links them to others, is freely available for use and/or repurposing by other teachers, researchers or students.

Jill Kirby, Project Manager, University of Sussex

Our challenge

We wanted to bring to light the unheard voices of the 1980s to allow people to judge for themselves a decade which tends to be represented by stereotyped images of yuppies and pop videos. This

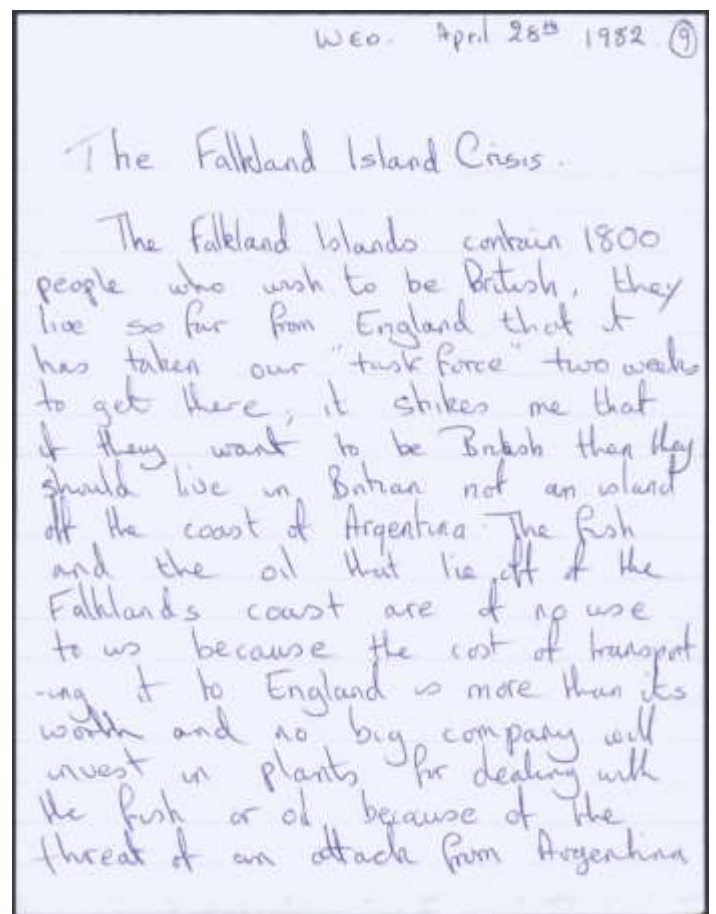


1Mass Observation Archive

meant bringing together materials from the Mass Observation Collections and the British Library Sound Archive as well as ephemera from the University of Sussex's relatively unused official publications collection. Mass Observation (MO) is an archive originally set up in the 1930s to capture the views and behaviours of ordinary people. It was restarted in 1981 and its writers are all volunteers who respond to regular questions (known as directives) sent out several times each year. They are free to write what they want and their correspondence provides a rich source of views, observations and a record of everyday life, useful to readers from multiple disciplines. Similarly, the oral history interviews in the British Library Sound Archive have been recorded as part of a wide range of different projects, all of which capture the views of people who might otherwise not be represented in historical records. We chose selections from both sources, loosely based around existing themes from a current undergraduate course (1984:Thatcher's Britain) at the University of Sussex, and themes emerging from the actual materials. Our themes included Britain at war (Falklands Conflict and Northern Ireland), unemployment, the miners' strike, resistance (Greenham Common, Poll Tax riots, Section 28), immigration and feminism, among others. We digitised the written and typed MO correspondence and the audio interviews and used extracts from them to develop a new teaching module (Moodle platform) and an Open Educational Resource (OER), available openly online, offering the teaching module and the 'raw' digitised research data, under a Creative Commons Licence. This was a first for both the Mass Observation Project (MOP), which has never been extensively digitised, and for the British Library which has not previously made sound files available under a Creative Commons licence.

By bringing together these resources, students and academics can now make and illustrate connections across and between the currently polarised views which tend to represent the decade as either one of positive political and economic reform or of damaging class war and social divisiveness. Additionally, a key benefit for educators at all levels, and reflective of Sussex's history of interdisciplinarity, is allowing open access to data which has potential for use across subject areas such as politics, sociology, oral history, cultural and media studies, linguistics, gender studies, narrative and memory studies, migration studies, folklore studies, anthropology and contemporary history.

Providing inspirational teaching and enriching student experience are key University goals and the Mass Observation Archive (MOA) and British Library Sound Archive are both committed to enhancing opportunities for innovative collaborative research and increasing the accessibility of their collections. Being able to click on an extract in the teaching module from an oral history interview with a soldier who saw his comrades killed alongside him in the Falklands War provides students with a powerful and engaging sense of history and provokes useful debate when juxtaposed with the views of Mass Observation correspondents critical of the war and with 'official' histories of the conflict. Similarly, hearing a sailor's wife recalling a conversation with a friend who planned to propose to his fiancée on his return, but was killed in the South Atlantic, raises pertinent issues about the purpose of oral history for interviewees as she discusses whether the fiancée ever knew. Responses to the project so far suggest that



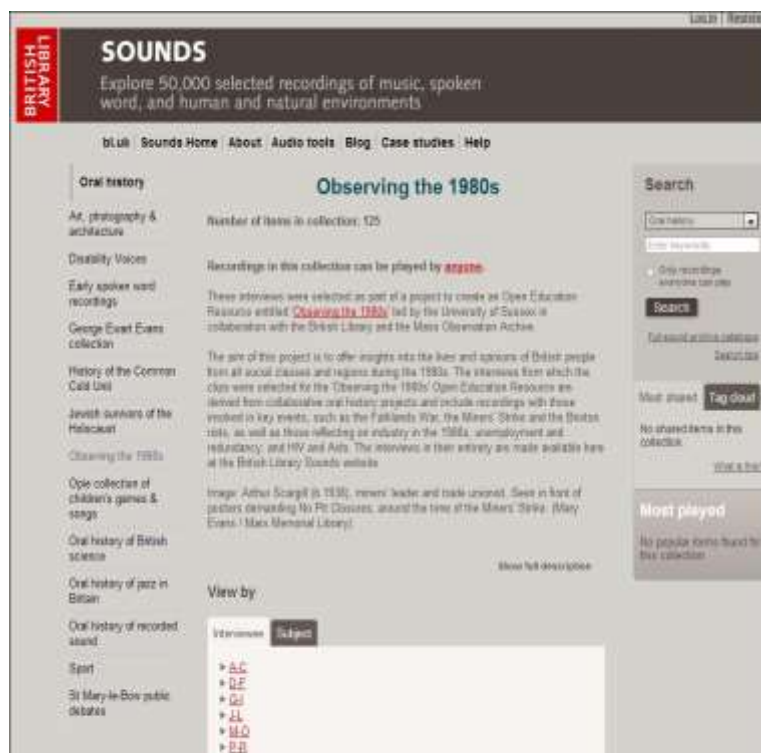
students are finding the voices of 'real' people a new and exciting insight into historical events which easy accessibility encourages them to explore.

What have we delivered?

We selected twenty-three Mass Observation correspondents who gave permission for their writings to be digitised and made available online under a BY-NC-SA Creative Commons licence. This amounted to over 4,000 pages of mostly handwritten text to be digitised. The digitised files in PDF format were anonymised and licensing information added before being linked to catalogue entries in the University of Sussex Special Collection catalogue and being uploaded to the project's Google Drive account, and the project website for sharing, as well as to Humbox.

We also selected twenty-six interviews from the British Library Sound Archive, constituting over a hundred hours of audio material. Some of the interviews had been recorded digitally and stored on mini-disks so required downloading, but the rest were on cassettes and needed to be digitised from scratch. We chose extracts for use in the teaching module and edited them from the larger interviews, which were made available to listen to and download from the British Library Sound Archive website.

We also identified thirty-eight items of ephemera from the University of Sussex Library official publications collection.



3Interviews British Library Sound Archive



These items were of varying formats from broadsheet newspaper to one third A4 folded leaflet and meant digitising over one thousand pages of different sizes. These were also downloaded and linked to the University of Sussex Special Collections catalogue as well as being made available via Google Drive and the project website.

4Ephemera

We developed a structure for the teaching module based roughly on the original course, but built into it extracts from the digitised materials to illustrate and illuminate the themes under discussion. For example, each weekly lecture and fortnightly seminar provides students with a list of readings – these included selections from MO correspondents and oral history interviews as well as ephemera documents and secondary reading. See the example page below which supports a lecture on the Falklands Conflict:

Readings

EDIT

Set Readings

Set Readings

MO MASS OBSERVATION

1982 Special Directive: Falklands War
Responses to the 1982 Special Directive (follow your chosen voice)

THE BRITISH LIBRARY
Explore the world's knowledge

One of the following

Russell Crompton (09:00-10:30) (15:30- 19:39/20:31) (20:31-22:44)

Ann Newey (47:09-49:50) (49:51- 52:55) (52:56-55:43) (01:00:42-01:05:11)

Charles Drought (01:21:26 - 01:25:51) (01:25:54 - 01:31:54) (01:31:54- 01:41:28) (01:41:35- 01:48:18) (01:48:18 - 01:52:26) (01:52:30- 01:55:00)

Tom Smith (01:37:53 - 01:40:45) (1:43:50 - 01:46:05) (01:46:05-1:50:10) (01:50:39- 01: 50:53)

US University of Sussex
Special collections

At least one of the following:

The Falklands: Thatcher's War, Labour's Guilt
Malvinas and Argentina's
Falklands War: The Disturbing Truth

*Hooker, Lucy Caroline *War and the British: gender, memory and national identity* (1998) chapter 5 Main
Ras Short / DA 587 MOA

* Seldon and Collings *Britain under Thatcher* p20-25, 23-38, p100-101, 106

If you are interested in resistance or anti-war movements you may also be interested in Cross, Richard *Crane and the Anarchist-punk movement 1977-1985* in *Socialist History* 26 p25

5Teaching module

Discoverability

All of the digitised materials are available online either via the [project website](#) or the [British Library Sound Archive](#) site. The Mass Observation and ephemera are also available from Humbox and the Mass Observation data has also been deposited with the [UK Data Archive](#) at the University of Essex. Links to the OER and data have been added to Jorum. Within the University of Sussex Special Collections catalogue we have created a separate [Observing the 1980s collection](#) with PDF files linked to each catalogue entry. As a result of the Mass Observation Archive moving to a purpose built facility in 2013 (The Keep) the catalogue will become fully discoverable thanks to Orangeleaf collections extraction and aggregation software. The OER teaching module can be downloaded from the project website and is also available via [guest login](#) (click on the 'sign in as a guest' link underneath the login box and type in 'observing the 1980s') at the Sussex Direct website (virtual learning environment). The nature of Mass Observation material makes it problematic to tag data or even identify key words as although responses are written to specific questions in directives, correspondents often include additional material, ignore the question, or reveal other subject matter in discussing the directive. So we have simply named individual files with the unique correspondent reference, directive and year. As much as possible we have included useful key words on the website and researchers or students can see which Mass Observation correspondents and British Library interviewees' materials we have selected against which specific themes. Researchers who access the [Special Collections catalogue](#) can also draw on thematic information in the catalogue entries created by previous archivists.

Dissemination

We launched the project on the day of the film premiere of 'The Iron Lady' in January 2012 to maximise coverage and were picked up by the BBC News website.



6 BBC News coverage

Throughout 2012 the project appeared in [several media](#) (scroll down the page to see a list and links). We were particularly pleased to feature in the The Guardian recently which resulted from our email-driven publicity. In addition members of the project team attended and spoke at conferences, blogged and tweeted and built up a network of interested parties. Feedback from delegates at the New Frontiers in Qualitative Longitudinal Research event at the University of Southampton highlighted the great opportunity the digitised MO material gives researchers to track the views of one correspondent across the period 1981-1990, and raised the profile of the data amongst an audience from various disciplines who were not aware of it.



7 BTEC students from Davison High

We have also already involved local schools in the project and held a workshop with BTEC students from Davison High. Further events are underway for 2013 including an Observing the 1980s workshop with Ratton School which will serve as a pilot for the roll out of a series of school workshops; a workshop with members of the Oyster disability

charity; and we are currently also in discussion with Lewes prison about using the digitised materials in a workshop with them. These activities, as well as provision of the online OER as a whole, support the University's strategic goal of playing a role in the broader socio-economic well-being of the region through improving local educational provision and enabling access to archives and collections.

As well as a [Twitter](#) hashtag #observing80s, we have a [Facebook page](#) and timeline which provides links to some of our data and a [Youtube channel](#) with a playlist of relevant videos relating to the OER teaching module. Positive responses and expressions of interest have already been received from a range of academics from institutions ranging from the University of Technology, Sydney, the University of Kent, who intend to embed the material into their British History teaching, Queens University, Canada, City University and Wuhan University in China, to name but a few.

Solving problems

1. Copyright and permissions

Selection was originally going to be based on reviewing content, matching it to themes then digitising it, as many Mass Observers had already given permission for their writings to be used. Unfortunately, after talking this through with Naomi Korn (lead copyright and rights management

consultant for the JISC) we realised that the permissions already given didn't relate to online content. Mindful of protecting the integrity of MO's reputation with current correspondents we revised our plan: we would only look at content from correspondents who wrote in the 1980s AND were still writing and therefore easily contacted. This gave us over ninety writers to choose from and we wrote to all of them anticipating that some would decline, but we'd have enough to choose from. To our amazement almost all of them agreed for their writings to be digitised and disseminated online, which means MOP now has a pool of potential material for future digitisation. We were then able to identify suitable content from our ninety and eventually settled on twenty-three correspondents.

A similar situation existed for the British Library interviews except the British Library already owned copyright in many of them including permission to make them available for any use. However, the curator there also contacted the majority of the interviewees to inform them of the proposed dissemination and licence terms. Where they could not be traced, the contingency position is to remove any material on request if someone who wasn't contacted comes forward and objects.

The third element of our primary resources, the so-called 'ephemera' items from the University of Sussex Library collection turned out to be the most time-consuming in terms of tracking down copyright holders. These documents range from booklets, pamphlets and newsletters to official publications, and a group of



8Undergraduates selecting ephemera

second year undergraduates studying the Thatcher's Britain course helped in the selection, using the JISC IPR risk management calculator. They also did some initial checking to see if copyright holders/publishers/authors could be traced online.

Despite this, many of the items selected did not have obvious authors or publishers so we spent considerable time tracking down contacts from whom to request permission. Again the majority whom we managed to contact were very happy for their work to be digitised and made available and the handful which we couldn't trace have been treated as orphan documents and again can be removed if someone comes forward to object.

2. Data management

The digitised MOP material revealed that many of the correspondents in the early years of the project had written their names and addresses on all their correspondence, or they had identified other people in their writings in a way which compromised their anonymity. This meant working through every single page of correspondence to blank out revealing material. As a result, at one stage we had various versions of the digitised material: PDFs for widest dissemination, JPGs as back up and the original high resolution TFF scans for MOP's future use. In practice, the project manager was really the only person who knew which versions of what were where at any time, so we would have benefited from a data management plan. However, once the anonymisation process was completed, back-ups of all the data were stored on the University server and the PDFs were also linked to the catalogue and all stored versions were clearly recorded. Data management expertise would also have been useful in managing the metadata. Because we originally expected to make the materials available via the University Repository where each record would provide relevant metadata we did not embed information at the digitisation stage. In retrospect it probably would have been useful to do so. Ultimately, we made our raw data available via web pages, cloud storage, and the Special Collections catalogue which will be fully discoverable later this year, but the issue of the institutional repository highlighted the difficulties of working within institutions where processes move slowly and to different agendas.

3. Stakeholder management

Different agendas can also make it difficult to co-ordinate the activities of many different contributors: not everyone has the same priorities, but most people have too many things to do, so it requires tenacity, patience and plenty of contingency planning to bring everything together. Again in retrospect we might have engaged specialist professionals to do work in some areas where we instead involved students or colleagues. This would have mitigated some of the last minute workarounds which came about due to pressures of work or illness. Institutional understanding of what the project was aiming to achieve and the work required from the project team was sometimes lacking and reflected the difficulties some fellow academics have in relating to a model of teaching-led research. It is almost certainly the case that several of the project team were involved in far more work for the project than was reflected in the buy-out of their time in the project plan and budget, but this was not acknowledged by their departments in terms of workload or other demands.

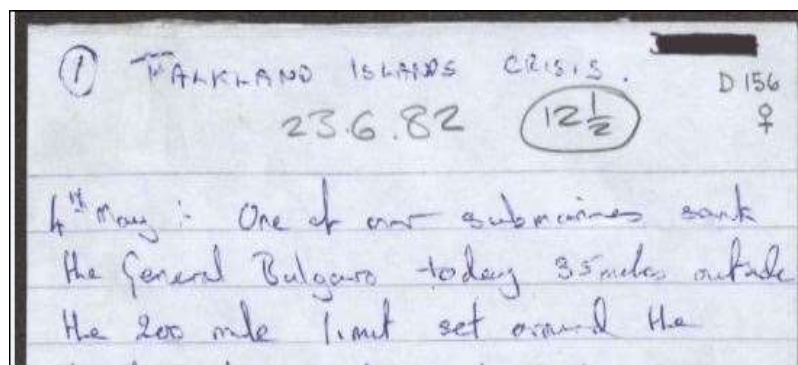
Impact

1. Learning

Whilst most of the team would probably count themselves as reasonably IT-literate, the project involved most of us in technology with which we were unfamiliar. In particular Dr Robinson and Jill Kirby, although familiar with Moodle through their teaching experience, were less confident about structuring e-learning teaching materials for a wider online environment. So our E-learning advisor, Stuart Lamour was invaluable in helping us to work through issues of accessibility, usability, attention span and search strategies as well as the different ways in which we could layout materials, identify what links needed to be in place and ensure that it was pleasing in design terms too. He also introduced us to the wider uses of cloud technology which became critical when we realised that we would not be able to make our data available from the University Repository. Google Drive and Soundcloud have enabled us to make our material available in an open way which is also easy to manage from an institutional point of view.

2. Student Experience

Students helped in selecting ephemera, anonymising the MO materials, listening to and editing audio interviews, creating catalogue entries and uploading data to external repositories as well as



9 Anonymising names

building our social media presence. They gained valuable CV-worthy experience of working on archival materials as well as insight into the data and we gained useful feedback on how they saw the material, for example one undergraduate, Samantha Fennessy who took part in the ephemera selection wrote a blog for us saying 'I have recently been researching on the impact of AIDS in the 1980s and so this was a unique resource which enabled me to look at materials that would have been otherwise unavailable to me.' Beth Howgate, who also worked on the ephemera blogged 'it was great to have access and engage with genuine documents from the 80s.' These students got hands-on experience of handling archive materials which is relatively rare for undergraduates. We also tested our webpages with undergraduate and postgraduate students before finalising them and they gave us useful feedback about tagging and search terms as well as indicating their interest in using the materials for their own research, for example one MA student told us, 'I have never studied the 1980s so reading contemporary opinion of some of the major events of the decade was fascinating'. An undergraduate commented 'Found it quite interesting to read about the experience of normal people in the 80s on basic things in life such as pocket money.' This highlights a key aim in including resources such as MO and oral history interviews in history teaching materials which is to show students an alternative to the 'top down' version of history which tends to be the norm for many of them. They also suggested additional materials which we might consider adding at a later date such as documentary clips or the provision of abstracts of the longer MO entries. We have also involved secondary school students in dissemination (helping to build our Facebook page and YouTube playlist, which included making suggestions on content) and evaluation and feedback (using the digitised materials in workshops).

3. Collaboration

More generally the project has given colleagues within the University of Sussex the opportunity to work across disciplines and specialisms to share knowledge and expertise and created greater awareness of each other's work and the potential for future collaboration. Similarly relationships have been developed with external partners, external contributors to the Advisory Group, potential users of the OER and other disciplines. It was useful to identify other JISC-funded projects dealing with similar content and be able to discuss common issue with them. For example we shared experiences and approaches regarding copyright and permissions with the OpenLIVES project manager in a 'phone call and at some of the JISC meetings. The latter were particularly useful for making contacts in relevant projects, gauging progress and finding common problems and challenges and potential ways of dealing with them.

4. Research and other projects

Work on the project has undoubtedly prompted 'teaching-led research' as Dr Robinson has identified several new threads of research as a result of the methodological debates and explorations of the materials provoked by developing and building the OER. For example, reflecting on the way in which Mass Observers were asked to periodize the 1980s, Dr Robinson is now looking at how they composed a 'perforated' relationship between lists of events and wider narratives. It has also lead to the use of [infographics](#) as a teaching tool which are easier to develop with digitally-accessible source material. The [infographics](#) have enabled us to pull together differing source materials to present the students with a way of triangulating sources, but also to show them the juxtaposition of views and perspectives on particular events.

The digitisation of the MOP materials also lead to the University's involvement in developing the Scarlet+ (another JISC-funded project) augmented reality application for education in collaboration with MIMAS.

The application named 'Voices in your pocket' enables a user with a smart phone or tablet to hover over an image which then brings up links taking them to additional material.



10Scarlet+ Augmented Reality app

So for our app we focus on introducing people who would not usually be represented in the room, which allows them to voice their attitudes towards MOP through text and video. The voices include a member of the MO staff, three Mass Observers and a student historian who has used MOP in their research. The observers are represented by their writings and the others via video. The image shows an example of hovering an ipad over a trigger image, with the Mass Observers represented by their codes and the videos by images.

The project is nearing completion and will be available to use in the classroom very soon. There were also small institutional impacts which resulted from the project such as creating an improved search function for guests accessing the teaching module via the Sussex Direct website, and cleaning up some items of dubious copyright status.

5. Feedback

The online data and links have only been live for a relatively short time but our webpages have had over 3,500 visits so far of which over 500 are repeat visits and visitors although predominantly from the UK also include significant numbers from the US, Australia and Europe. Our Facebook page is now liked by over 150 people and has served as a useful entry point and means of dissemination of the material. We carried out qualitative research with post-graduate and undergraduate students, and the majority of both groups found using the resources easy and said they'd be likely to use them in future for their own research. Comments included 'I thought that the online folders were easy to use and very clear' and 'It was also very helpful that the pdf files were accurately labelled for downloading purposes.' We also asked students about the sorts of search terms they would use if looking for material about the 1980s and built these into our web pages.

Whilst developing the resources we have actively engaged other academics in discussion about what will be (and now is) available. From Nottingham University one colleague commented, 'I will be using this on my Archive Methods module', while a lecturer on the BA Art and Design course at Manchester Metropolitan told us, 'I would certainly be interested to use this resource in relation to design and everyday life in the 80s.' Particularly satisfying is the range

Feedback

'The fashion students I teach absolutely love and even mythologise the 80s. They see it as a paradise of exoticism and sub-culture! My own research into charity in the 1980s using MOA means I am naturally attracted to your project.'

Brighton University

'Excellent for undergraduate or postgraduate dissertations and possible PhD thesis. Also qualitative methods courses.'

Cardiff University

'I would like to make links between the resources and my own biography and documentation relating to the 80s. In particular interviews I undertook with S Wales steelworkers at the time of the miners' strike.'

Open University

of disciplines these academics represent and to which our resources appeal, including art and design, fashion, history of design, society and culture, social sciences, research methodological studies, as well as British history and more general history courses. The revised Thatcher's Britain course is currently being taught at the University of Sussex so we will also be carrying out evaluation with these students during the Spring term to gauge their views of the wealth of resources now available to them and how learning about the 1980s is different as a result.

Conclusions

We are immensely proud of the resources which we have delivered through the Observing the 1980s project. The materials in the MOP and British Library Sound Archive are fantastically rich resources which are now available for the first time to many more people in an easily accessible way. We have also created a teaching module of incredible depth and variety which offers students a wonderful opportunity to build research skills and create new meanings. We still have some dissemination activities remaining and are optimistic about the response and the development opportunities we will continue to receive.

Appendix

Project Team

Jane Harvell, Head of Academic Services, Library, University of Sussex, Project Lead

Jill Kirby, Doctoral Researcher, Project Manager

Fiona Courage, Mass Observation Curator

Dr Lucy Robinson, Lecturer in Contemporary History

Stuart Lamour, E-learning developer

Jessica Scantlebury, Mass Observation Senior Archive Assistant



Advisory Board

Professor Dorothy Sheridan, MOA trustee, consultant

Dr Richard Follett, Director of Learning and Teaching in the School of History, Art History and Philosophy

Dr Carol Shergold, Head of Learning Systems

John Davies, Education Developer

Kitty Inglis, Chair of MOA Trustees and University Librarian

Dr Rob Perks of the British Library

Dr Lucy Noakes of the School of Humanities at Brighton University.